

Ujouroku

by psiten

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Summary: "Sometimes, I thought the Yukimura Chizuru who had started out of Edo to find her father had disappeared and left me in her place. Everything before that cold, snowy night when the Shinsengumi found me seemed at best like a half-remembered dream." The more things stay the same, the more the world seems to change. (Some meta content) Originally for Yuletide 2012 - gift for Mippa.

Ujouroku

__**DISCLAIMER:**__ the original video game __Hakuouki__ was created by Idea Factory, and the anime is the work of Studio DEEN. The Shinsengumi belong only to themselves. Characters have been adapted without authorization or approval, and I am making no profit from their use.__

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><p>[Ujouroku]

I slid my fingers along the now familiar wood of the window that let the sun in each morning, wondering what day it was. I'd lost track of the days and weeks. It was May; I was sure of that, though living with the Shinsengumi I missed the market trips, chores, and visitors that used to set off one day from another.**>

Or rather, I didn't belong to them anymore. Their lack left nothing empty inside me. Sometimes, I thought the Yukimura Chizuru who had started out of Edo to find her father had disappeared and left me in her place. Everything before that cold, snowy night when the Shinsengumi found me seemed at best like a half-remembered dream. Whenever I set my foot on the wooden dojo floor, smelled the buckwheat of the plain soba Saitou-san made on his turn to cook, or stoked the bath house fire, this felt like everything that had ever

been real.

The memories I could summon when I strapped my kodachi to my waist felt like scenes from another girl's life, as if the sword slashing through the heart of that feral demon of a man while I watched from the frozen ground had cut my heart as well. It had severed this person I was from the person I had been, ripping through my chest then as the memory trembled in me now. The first clear memory I had.

Everything before that had faded. The me left behind had changed.

This was my life now. When I traced the edge of the door, I felt in my skin how the shape of this world fit. The smell of stone and steel in the air somehow comforted my mind before I pushed that door open. These were people I wouldn't know how to leave. Even if... even after I finally tracked down news of my father, I wanted to belong by their side more than I could remember ever wanting anything before. I'd have to find new patterns in my new life to help me keep track of the time.

I half expected a guard posted outside my door to smirk and make some remark on my strained expression. My mind offered up an image of Okita-san jibing that I oughtn't lose myself in thought, as he still planned to kill me if I held him back in any way, or Heisuke-kun might have poked me in the shoulder to ask what was wrong. I don't know how I would have told him if he had, but I was spared the chance to find out. There was no guard at all.

How had I forgotten? Recollections faded in all at once, reminding me how - sometime after the cold of winter had warmed to spring - the old pattern of captains shadowing my movements to keep me from escaping had faded away. More freedom to wander the compound, more certainty that I wouldn't run. I'd started to think of them more as friends, and they'd all answered by deciding I didn't need to be watched. But I could still hear their laughing ghosts, waiting by my door for when I tried to leave, and happy enough for the company once I'd realized they were there.

Well, there was hardly any point in sighing for the days when I'd been as good as a prisoner. Now I had a job to do, even if Hijikata-san kept saying he didn't need me and foisting me off on anyone else who needed a helping hand. I nodded and smiled at the squad members in the yard as I walked to the kitchen, sneaking around Tani-san in the kitchen while he took his turn cooking breakfast. He didn't have much to say, as I barely ever saw the 7th Squad captain outside of his spear matches with Harada-san, but a few pleasantries and a laugh was plenty. I couldn't stay for a long chat. Hijikata-san would need his morning tea, whether he asked for it or not - with two extra spoonfuls of tea in the pot to make it a bit stronger, like he preferred.

With the brewed pot and cup steaming on the tray, I stepped out into the late spring air. It was verging on early summer, very nearly. As early as it was, the crack of wooden swords already rang out of the dojo. Was it Heisuke-kun, teaching a class so early in the morning? I always saw Saitou-san's classes outside by the steps in the afternoons, and if Okita-san was out of bed before breakfast, he was more likely to be playing tag with the local children. His classes

happened when everyone was more on their toes than they'd be on an early, everyday morning.

I stopped outside the door of the dojo, just to peek. A flutter danced in my stomach, watching the strikes of all the squad members stepping, attacking, and blocking in time, their feet making a drum of the floor and their chorused yells sinking into the wood. They were practicing kata for now, not sparring. A feeling like a whisper made me look for Heisuke-kun, and like an odd, quiet compulsion, I felt I ought to be disappointed not to see him. But of course he wasn't teaching, I told myself, my inner voice chiding me for how I'd forgotten - Nagakura-san was the other kenjutsu instructor, not Heisuke-kun.

How could that have slipped my mind?

Kondou-san, too, with his ready smile replaced for the moment with perfect seriousness, was making the rounds through the pairs of fighters, his arms crossed over his chest and hidden in his haori when he wasn't correcting a student. Fixing the bend of an arm here, the turn of a foot there, elsewhere someone's grip on the hilt of his practice sword. He didn't seem to see me there, too absorbed in his work.

I didn't hear the footsteps approaching until a heel hit solidly on the wood behind me, as if to demand my attention. A shiver shot straight up my spine. "You seem to have a great deal of time on your hands, I see," a stern voice said from a few bare inches behind my head.

The tea nearly spilled on the tray as I whipped around. The tall, green and blue-clad figure had his mouth drawn into a tight line under his glasses. "Sannan-san! No, I...! I didn't mean... to..."

My voice fell away. There was something about the darkness where the shadowing light of the sun behind him obscured his features. Something about his frown that made me feel ice cold. Something that made me tremble.

Almost as ghostlike as my memories of home, a flash of some unreal recollection shot over the sight before my eyes, then faded more quickly than it came. The awareness of it, though... that lingered longer than the moment. White hair, like the crazed men I'd seen in the snow. Eyes that glowed as red as coals. Bloodlust. A knife. Or was it a sword? Or a hand around my throat? I fought back the urge to grab at my neck, feeling a choking sensation without anything to cause it.

Why would I imagine Sannan-san being like those men? Even when he was hard, he seemed considerate underneath, and most of all possessed of a control that couldn't have lived in the manic faces I'd seen for those few moments before Saitou-san's blade had sliced through the darkness. I took a deep breath and tried to still the heart thundering in my chest.

"I was on my way to Hijikata-san's quarters, to bring him some tea," I said.

With a spare twist of the mouth that could have been a smile, he answered, "Then you'd best get it to him before it cools off."

Lukewarm tea will hardly help the mood he's been in today."

Barely past dawn, and the Vice Commander was already hard at work. Most likely he'd been going over some information on the Choushuu ronin that'd been delivered in the night, hoping his spies had found some lead as to what their enemies were planning and where their men were secreted away. He wouldn't have lost sleep over drill schedules, patching holes in the pig shed, or the state of accounts with merchants in town.

"Sannan-kun! Don't stand around outside!" Kondou-san had stopped by the door, smile lighting up his face again, while the men inside practiced their exchanges of blows. "Come in, come in. You, too, Yukimura-kun. I heard Saitou-kun's report on how you use a blade. This lesson is a good level for you if you want to practice. We've got enough extra shinai in here."

"Me?" I gasped. "But I..." A question welled up in my mind about how Saitou-san could have told him anything about my training at my kodachi dojo in Edo, but I didn't ask him. The confident smile on his face said he had his reasons, and they were all masters. "... .." I glanced down at the tray of tea that was, thankfully, still steaming. "I ought to get this tea to Hijikata-san," I said at last.

"She has duties, Kondou-san," Sannan-san chided. "Hijikata-kun will hardly thank you for distracting her."

With a laugh, Kondou-san clapped me on the shoulder and pointed me off towards Hijikata-san's quarters. "Next time, then, Yukimura-kun. Our Vice-Commander doesn't like waiting, it's true." As I walked away, he answered some murmur from Sannan-san with a loud rebuff. "I'm sure if I talk to Toshi about it, he'll just grumble about me bringing him such a petty question," he insisted. "Then he'll say she should do what she wants and he never needed her to fetch his tea in the first place."

I had to swallow a laugh. I could just see the sour face Hijikata-san would put on when he said it, too.

"No doubt. But are you sure you want to take the risk of someone finding out-"

That was all I heard before I got far enough away that the carrying echoes of practice and simple distance drowned out Sannan-san's voice. I didn't need to hear more. I knew it could make trouble with the Shinsengumi if too many people found out I was a girl, not a boy as I'd pretended to be so I could travel to the Capital. But if Kondou-san planned to let me practice with the squad members - and it sounded better than the few swings I could do in my room or on the grounds with my kodachi before I disturbed anyone - he had to have some kind of idea.

Before I knew it, I'd reached the door where I could hear Hijikata-san growling out orders to someone. I opened the door as quietly as I could and stepped over the threshold, barely daring to breathe. "Tell them they need to do better!" Hijikata-san snapped, going back to the paperwork at his desk. "The First Squad can't hand in sloppy reports like this. If Souji doesn't like it, he can come talk to me."

"Yes, sir," said the boy standing to the side of the desk. It looked like Ichimura-kun getting the lecture, a recruit about the same age as me who'd handled anything Hijikata-san might have needed of an attendant before I'd arrived. Now we tried to stay out of each others' way and to keep from doubling up on our work, since Hijikata-san had declared that he had no intention of throwing away a perfectly good personal assistant just so he could train another. At least there was enough work to go around, without either of us becoming redundant.

It must have been him who'd brought the tray that'd been pushed away from Hijikata-san's side. A couple dishes sat on it, now cleaned of rice and what looked like pickled vegetables. They were too old to have been breakfast, but might well have been from a few hours before. Setting down the tea tray where Hijikata-san could get to it if he wanted without it getting in his way, I arranged the plates from his midnight snack and picked up the empty tray. I would have left without another word if Hijikata-san hadn't narrowed his eyes at me like he wanted me to stay.

"You, there."

"Yes, sir?"

I stilled the odd dreams that flashed in my mind again, showing me a glimpse like a memory of that face with shorter hair, a Western jacket trimmed with gold and flowered brocade... a battle under a sakura tree with a man I couldn't have known but somehow felt I did know. More than anything, I tried to put down a burning in my cheeks at the thought of a kiss, when I never would have dared to think something like that. But how could I help it, when whatever strange madness had crept into my head this morning made me feel like it wasn't just a thought? It felt, for all that I couldn't say why or how or when, like something that had happened.

But it couldn't have happened. It never had. I knew that. I'd only been here a scant few months, and I would have noticed if the famous Demon Vice-Commander of the Shinsengumi, the same Hijikata Toshizou whose chiseled elegance had nearly stopped my heart the first night I'd seen the pale blue Shinsengumi haori, had cut his hair or kissed me. He'd done neither.

"What are you staring at?" His voice broke me out of my daze.

"N-nothing at all," I stammered. "Is there something I can do for you?"

A voice whispered in my mind that he might tell me to meet Saitou-san to go on patrol with the Third Squad. They'd be leaving for their morning rounds in fifteen minutes or so. I could...

Why would I have thought that? Since January, for months now, I hadn't once seen the outside of this compound. None of the commanders or captains had offered me any hope of going out to look for my father beyond their promise when I'd first arrived that they wouldn't stop looking until they'd found him. Certainly, no one had offered to let me join an official patrol.

And Hijikata-san didn't offer today. As usual, he half-growled, "Gen-san was looking for a hand with the laundry. You can find him out by the well and ask what he wants you to do."

"Of course." I bowed over the tray in my hands. The kitchen wouldn't be too far out of the way. I could stop there and set the old dishes in order first, then meet the Sixth Squad captain out in the courtyard. "I'll take my leave, then."

He turned back to the reports he'd been studying, and marked a few notes on a map of the Gion district. "Ichimura-kun, you're dismissed, too. Find Souji. He's probably down by the river."

"Yes, sir," the boy answered, walking behind me towards the door. I barely noticed him open it for me. It was such an odd relief to be back outside, in the sunshine, away from whatever strange illusions had started to haunt me today. Ichimura-kun was laughing as he slid the door shut again. "You need to stop letting him scare you, Yukimura. Hijikata-san's not going to bite, and he probably won't kill you either."

"Every faction in the Capital is afraid of him!" I laughed, walking back toward the kitchen as Ichimura-kun strolled along beside me, stretching his arms over his head. The river was in the same direction. "Are you telling me to be braver than every warrior and general in the Aizu, Satsuma, Mori, and whatever other clans might be in town today?"

His grin was just about wide enough to fall off his face. "That's them," Ichimura-kun said, and slapped me on the back of the shoulder. "You're one of us. I don't know why they haven't given you a uniform yet and assigned you to a proper squad instead of having you run around for odd jobs all the time. I mean, I'm a page, too, but they still had me training with Okita-san's squad at two months! But just hang in there, Yukimura. You'll get your chance." With that, he jumped off the walk to a dirt path leading out of the compound.

I smiled, and didn't tell him that I wasn't quite like the rest of the Shinsengumi's recruits. Although it was nice to hear him say I was one of them. As he walked away, I called out, "Ichimura-kun!" and he looked back over his shoulder. "Could you... remind me what day it is?"

He chuckled. "It's Wednesday, scatter-brain!"

Wednesday. And tomorrow would be Thursday. I'd do my best not to lose track of that again - or else how would I ever have a chance to go to one of Kondou-san's kenjutsu lessons?

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I decided to call that day 'The Laundry Incident', for lack of a better name - at least when I gave it a name in my head. How could I tell any of the others what was happening? I didn't even understand it myself.

_After Saitou-san's squad came back from their morning rounds, he came to practice his cuts in the courtyard where I was washing the sheets, and Okita-san stopped by to watch. That was the day Okita-san suggested I go out on patrol with the squads, since they couldn't

spare members to guard me, and that was the day Saitou-san tested my blade to see how I could defend myself._

How odd, I thought, that the arrangement I'd imagined would come to pass. Even more odd was the fact that Saitou-san had tested me, when earlier Kondou-san had said Saitou-san had told him about the level of my sword. It was as if he'd already known what would happen.

Perhaps the oddest thing of all was, if I could try to describe it, the way the days rushed forward unheeded. The next day that made a mark in my mind was a Saturday, not a Thursday. Somehow, all the intervening days had passed without me noting that I'd slept or woken, and the warmth of early June had come to full bloom. Hijikata-san had finally given his permission for me to accompany troops on their way to patrol areas where he'd heard word of my father. If it hadn't been for that, I never would have run into that shop, and Okita-san never would have brought that man back to the compound - the one whose word that the Choushuu planned to set the Capital aflame had sent every able-bodied fighter in the Shinsengumi out in the streets tonight as Saturday turned into Sunday.

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I ran through the streets as fast as I could, rushing away from the men Yamazaki-san had cornered by the compound. My feet and calves ached from striking the hard, night-chilled ground and my lungs burned with every breath, but I pushed through the pain until I could barely feel it. I couldn't risk wasting even a second. Then, before I knew it, I'd reached Hijikata-san and his corps of men. Falling over forward to catch my breath, hearing but hardly sensible to their questions about why I was there, I gasped, "The meeting... is at the Ikeda-ya!"

After that, there was no more time to rest. There were plans, there were orders, and then there was only another mad chase. My breath was as caught as I could expect it to be. At a yell from Hijikata-san, the tight knot of troops thundered through the streets toward the other side of the river, bobbing lanterns ahead of them making the sky blue and white haori on the men's backs glow like ghosts in the night. They ran so fast, it was all I could do to keep up. My feet ran, my legs pulled, my body hurtled forward because it had to, and as I followed the stream of fighters through the unfamiliar streets, suddenly - it was there.

The Ikeda-ya.

Outside the innocent-looking inn, we could hear the clash of steel on steel and the crack of splintering wood, here and there catching a glimpse of a face in the window trying to steal a hidden peek at the violence happening so close to their doors. None of them looked closely enough to risk being drawn in, and the shutters all clicked closed when two men staggered out of the building, one hanging tight on the other's shoulder and both of them wearing slashed Shinsengumi livery stained with blood. I held back a shudder, thinking of the captains and members I'd seen practicing their sword strikes with wood and bamboo in orderly lines under the sun, now enmeshed in battle against real foes, with real swords, scattered throughout the darkened halls. The fervid crashes echoing inside weren't anything like the song swords made in practice, when they rang like bells or

drums in time. The sounds were razor sharp, and fierce, like the cry of a hawk or the sudden crack of lightning. I know I'll never forget those sounds as long as I live.

And just like that moment at the Laundry Incident, it felt like I already knew them. Like I had already lived this moment, and that impossible act of 'forgetting' had wiped my mind as clean as the seashore after a wave rolled out to the ocean, even though there was no way I could have stood on this Kyoto street before, with these men, as this battle raged inside. No way at all.

Not a single lantern burned in the windows to throw black shadows where I could see what was happening within the walls. Meanwhile, all around me, fresh soldiers rushed in with their fingers gripping tight on the hilts of their swords, and Harada-san told Hijikata-san that he'd take his men to hold the back gate. Even here, outside the main fray, everything seemed too fast, too loud, too sudden to understand what was happening. I breathed deep as I stood, and the air still cut into my punished lungs but I managed to still the shaking of my hand. The trembling of the blood in my throat and the sick feeling every time I heard a clash or a scream would fade soon, I promised myself.

In the confusion, Yamazaki-san had caught up to us here, conferring with Hijikata-san in the street. Saitou-san's men were all inside now, with more injured warriors limping out the front door. I knelt to bind up one man's arm with a scrap of cloth. I'd seen blood on bandages before, and lived with the smell of surgeries and medicines, but the dark stain drunk up by the cloth of his haori looked like oil in the blackness of the night - so much of a mess that I couldn't be certain the wound was properly bound.

And the scent of blood was heavy over everything. Metallic and foreboding, the smell poured down my throat with a choking thickness. If I'd been calm enough to be properly, cognizantly scared, I might have been sick. As it was, blocking out everything around me except for the act of tying on that bandage was all I could do.

"Don't worry about me," the man said, nodding at the door. "There's worse inside."

"Okay!" I answered. Before my thoughts could catch up with my feet, I was already past the door - in the dark, sword-filled hallways thick with blue-clad flashes of action running at figures that melted like shadows, gleaming blades cutting white through the darkness and clanging in a cacophony from every direction I could name. My eyes hadn't even adjusted enough to see what was wall and what was air, let alone to know a wounded man from a whole one. Any thought of how I could help ran out of my mind like water through a net.

This was battle, more terrifying than any of the clashes I'd seen where the Shinsengumi's squads handled ronin in the streets with a few graceful cuts and a smirk. This was brutal. Even if I couldn't see it in the shadows, the smell of blood was even thicker than it had been outside. The scent itself was like a wall, stopping me in my tracks.

A body pushed past me, and I backed into a post, out of the way of a slash that brought down one of the unnamed figures who seemed to be an enemy. Anyone in a plain, dark haori - not the pale blue that

caught what little light could be found - had one name to share, and it was 'foe'. As I watched, the man marked by the white-mountain stripe as 'friend' called out. "Yukimura-kun?! What are you doing here?!"

Kondou-san. I knew his voice as soon as I heard it, the sound bringing me back to my senses, and I recognized his face a moment later. My eyes were starting to adjust to the low light inside the building. "I... !" I started, but I didn't have the words to explain. I felt like I should, but I didn't. He didn't ask again.

Another foe sprang at him, and Kondou-san locked swords. He pushed his body between the stranger and me, covering me from harm as I reached out for the safe warmth of his back in this room that seemed at once sweltering enough to make sweat drip down my neck and chilling enough to shake me from marrow to skin. "Well, you're here now. Can you go help Souji? He's on the second floor, coughing up blood."

His words called up another memory-like image in my mind, this time of Okita-san on the floor, red blood coming out from his mouth but with enough strength still in his arms to stop an enemy's sword from taking me. An enemy, my mind told me, who looked just like the man I'd seen in one of these visions before. He'd been the one dueling Hijikata-san under the sakura tree. In the heat of that instant, I didn't have the sense to doubt that it was real. All I could do was act.

I glanced through the dimness at the stairs. The path was clear, at least for now. I could make it if I ran, I thought, and I dashed across the floor. The landscape of battle moved too fast for me to follow, though. Just before I reached the railing, I barely missed Nagakura-san stepping back from laying another enemy low. His red-drenched hand only brushed my arm.

"Nagakura-san! You're wounded!" I wailed.

He shook the hand, and scanned the room for his next opponent with a grin. "It's just a scratch. Heisuke looks like he's in bad shape, though. He's bleeding from the head."

Even though the battle raged on around me, I knew, my world seemed to go still as the choice waited in front of me. Go to Okita-san, as Kondou-san had asked? Or find Heisuke-kun to see if I could help him? I was worried about them both. But the image of Okita-san, the viciously perfect swordsman, at the mercy of an enemy and coughing up blood like a drowning man coughing up water... Not to mention the face of that enemy, the one I was sure I'd see there despite never having met anyone like that in my life... All the answers to the questions clawing at my chest might just be in that room along with a man I knew might need my help desperately. I had to go to where Okita-san was.

No sooner had I thought that than my feet moved on their own, and not towards Okita-san. As if by some will other than mine, they raced me down another hallway, my mind screaming out in a desperate frenzy that this wasn't the way I wanted to go. But nothing I could do would turn my path around. There, in front of my eyes, Heisuke-kun faced a large, red-haired man who looked easily as dangerous as the enemy my mind told me was battling Okita-san right now.

I was here. I'd do whatever I could. How could I run away from the crisis right in front of my eyes? I couldn't, no matter how much my mind rebelled against the rough impression that my actions hadn't been my own.

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After I noticed it once, I noticed it again and again. As the months wore down, as I saw the city burn, as I tried to find a reason why my thoughts or my movements seemed not to be my own - I noticed how strange memories of what was about to happen haunted my every step. Not visions, not premonitions. I was as certain that they were memories as I was sure of the home where I'd lived in Edo. The same wistful and nostalgic bittersweetness hung over the impossible lives locked in my head when I looked at the warriors I'd come to respect, to hope I could help whether I could love them or not.

Hijikata-san under a sakura tree.

Okita-san in a sunlit, summer field.

Saitou-san while the snow fell.

Time passed, and I remembered them more and more clearly, almost more clearly than I remembered home. I couldn't presume to ask any of them if they saw the same things when they looked at me. And yet, sometimes I thought I saw them look at me, and ponder, and look away as if some hint of my crazy notions had reached them despite my decision not to speak. But they never stopped being exactly as forthright as they had always been.

Or at least, they were still what I had always thought they had been, since I first got to know them by face and by name. Every time days or weeks skipped by without my notice, I asked myself how sure I was that any of this was real; and every time I decided to move in one direction only to find my feet on an opposite path, I wondered if I had any more control over myself than I had over the world in a dream.

I wondered if this might not all be a dream after all - everything that seemed so real, while the visions seemed so distant. And if I ever woke, who would I be? Would I still be the girl I was now? Or would I wake up as the Yukimura Chizuru who lived a quiet, simple life with her father, the doctor, in Edo? Would I even remember that this had happened? Would I dream again someday, and find myself back on the phantom streets of the Capital as if for the first time, running from monsters in the night straight into the arms of the infamous blue-coated demon corps of Mibu - to learn all over again that the Shinsengumi had more humanity in their company than any rumor had ever put to their credit?

What would become of me and of the choices I'd made?

Wondering that, six more months passed. Winter fell again, and under a blanket of snow I saw a full year turn around from the first day I'd set foot in this world.

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I looked again at the 'stranger in our midst' - the two months since Itou-san had come to the Capital seeming to have vanished quite entirely in the blink of an eye. It might as well have been yesterday that he'd come to meet with Kondou-san and the rest of the commanders for all that I felt the passage of time between then and now. Nevertheless, as I cleared the empty tea cups and set down freshly brewed replacements, he wrangled with the commanders and captains as if he'd long since grown accustomed to this life.

Itou-san. The sense I'd come to trust over the past few months far more than I could understand told me he'd be bad to have around. The look in Sannan-san's eyes right now said that this man with his sneers and insinuations had already begun to throw our lives into disarray.

And it made me tremble again for what I thought might be coming.

Kondou-san spoke next to my ear, though his identity barely registered in my thoughts now that my nerves had reduced my hands to shaking. "Well, then, where do you recommend?" he asked the room.

The new headquarters. That was happening, too. Talk of space needed for new recruits and of rooting the Choushuu forces out of their hiding places swirled in my head, and the murmur, "Nishi Hongan-ji," passed my lips before I knew what I was saying. Luckily, the only people to hear were Kondou-san on my left and Sannan-san on my right, each of them flicking glances in my direction too subtle to get the attention of the circle.

A few seats away, as I tried to vanish from sight with the emptied cups on my tray, I heard Hijikata-san say the words that had just come out of my mouth. "Nishi Hongan-ji," he announced. Imagining I could feel Kondou-san's eyes' heat on my back, I stole out the door as fast as I could. They'd know, easily, that Hijikata-san wouldn't have discussed his plans with me. I couldn't explain how I'd known he'd suggest that. Who would believe me?

Would they accuse me of reading papers from the Vice Commander's desk? Anyone who'd been in Hijikata-san's company for more than five minutes knew how harsh the Shinsengumi could be on traitors, or even those suspected of treachery. Judgment under the Makoto flag was quick and came at the point of a sword, no matter how kind the person wielding it might have been.

Then again, maybe they wouldn't kill me. I wasn't a warrior, and they might believe it was something I had glimpsed without intending it. Couldn't I trust them to understand they could trust me? Although if Okita-san had heard, he'd certainly make a joke of how I ought to be 'dealt with'... And being cast out over the risk that I'd learn more things I shouldn't know might be almost as bad as dying. I didn't want to leave.

I couldn't move away from the door, listening to the conversation echoing behind me with all the words I expected to hear. They drank, they sniped, the newcomer's crisp-cut words about Sannan-san rang out through the air that seemed so ridiculously bright with sunshine for such a cruel moment as this. Hijikata-san's yells shook me to my

toes. I clutched the tray tight to my chest. The warm streams of tears welled up at the corners of my eyes and stung in the bitter cold of winter. I hadn't realized how cold until then, with the slow wind digging into my bones made worse by the stinging heat of salt tears. How long had it been since I'd cried?

This wouldn't do at all. I had less explanation for this than I had for knowing the name of a temple where the Shinsengumi might find room for all their men. Blotting the wetness out of my eyes with the hem of my sleeve before it could become a torrent, I forced the cold air into my lungs, slowly and deep. Just in time. The door slid into its frame with a slam behind me.

"No need for a Deputy Commander when we have such a capable Staff Officer, I see."

Sannan-san walked five sharp steps down the veranda, then stopped. We stared at each other, for I couldn't say how long, and with a twist of a frown he walked away around the corner.

It was coming, wasn't it? When he transformed, if he transformed. It was coming soon.

If it was or it wasn't, nothing I'd seen could tell me for sure the reason why. Like the rest of the memories that weren't memories that came to mind, I might not know until the moment it happened. And yet, the same conviction I couldn't explain that told me Itou-san would make trouble told me over and over that, even as a monster, Sannan-san would be Sannan-san. I couldn't stay afraid when I was sure of that.

I took another deep breath and stepped out toward the well in the courtyard, placing all the cups in the wash tray I'd left on my way in. The water from the well was biting cold, and the wind made it worse, but the sharp pain and the motions of washing out the tea cups settled my heart a little more. By the time the rest of the captains and commanders left their meeting, I felt as normal as I could remember how to feel anymore.

And very nearly certain no one would even think of killing me. All the same, I let out a sigh when they disappeared in their several directions and their voices disappeared. I hadn't even realized how tense my shoulders had been, or that I'd been holding my breath.

I caught it right back in as the weight of a haori fell on my shoulders. It was warm with a body's heat and smelled faintly of that distinct but indescribable scent attending men that made me feel oddly comfortable after my months here despite how it still made my stomach flutter. The tea cups fell out of my hands into the shallow pan, rolling in the water as I wrenched my head to the left. The commander was standing not a yard away. He'd walked up without me noticing he'd approached. "Kondou-san," I cried out in surprise even as I pulled his haori tighter around my chest. Now that I had a further shield against the winter cold, I started to shiver in earnest and felt the warmth seeping into my skin and muscles.

He didn't show any of the easy smiles I'd come to associate with him, but neither did his gaze have the stern, sad anger he could summon to make any member of the ranks stop their actions and lower their heads to apologize. His eyes narrowed at me, sharp and thoughtful. "You

haven't suddenly become a veteran strategist who knows this city like the back of your hand, have you, Yukimura-kun?" There was no uncertainty in his voice at all. He knew the answer to that.

"... .." I couldn't make a noise as all my words caught in my throat.

A corner of his lip peaked in a grim imitation of a smile. "That's what I thought." Walking behind me, he breathed a heavy sigh and came up around the other side of the well to lean against the post. "Which begs the question of how you know about Toshi's surprises. From the way you ran out of there, I'd say it wasn't something you thought you ought to know. Toshi mustn't have told you himself."

Just like I'd feared. Shaking my head, I insisted, "I don't know how I thought of it! It just slipped out! Please believe me, I--"

His hand came to rest on my head, and this time he was smiling, broad and bright. "Take it easy, Yukimura-kun! We know you're not a spy," he answered with the certainty of a man who'd probably long since confirmed the story I'd told of my past and who - I knew well - had his own spies keeping watch on the compound and the city day and night. I should have known better than to think they'd cast me out for something as small as knowing a plan so far from secret as to be openly discussed at a meeting where they'd asked me to serve tea. Then the levity fell from his face again. Perfectly serious, he dropped his hand back to his side and asked, "Have you been seeing things? Or... Or feeling things, as if this had all happened before?"

I felt my eyes fly open wide. "You knew?!"

He collapsed into a seat on the bench, face relaxing into a grin. "Thank goodness! I thought I was going insane."

Sannan-san's voice called from the building behind me. "You, too, Kondou-san?" He'd stepped around the corner again, back onto the veranda, while I hadn't been looking.

With a rolling laugh, Kondou-san boomed out, "Well, I suppose we might still be insane - all of us together - but it doesn't seem so bad this way! I wonder how many of the others are seeing it?"

"But you're not worried?" I asked. "We don't know what's going on. If it's all of us, then I don't think it's an illusion. We can't have lived through all this before, can we?"

Standing up, he breathed deep and put his hands on his hips. "Well, I always said if I had a second chance, I'd do everything over again, just the same. I don't regret any choices I've made. And I don't think there's any time I'd rather be alive!" I giggled softly, and he answered with a smile. Any of them would said the same, I imagined. All of the men I'd grown so fond of had that kind of conviction in common, leading them to answer when Kondou-san called them to arms, and never to apologize or feel shame no matter how many times people called them wolves in whispers on the street.

All at once, the unexplained feelings of memory seemed so much less frightening as he patted me on the shoulder and strode away. "If we find a reason, we'll find it. In the meantime, I'm more concerned

about the Choushuu - and whether or not you're showing up for sword practice tomorrow morning!" he called out, turning around for a moment.

"I'll be there!" I answered.

He'd left his haori around my shoulders. I'd have to return it once I'd taken the tea cups back to the kitchen. He didn't look himself without it.

As I turned back to the well, I saw Sannan-san still standing on the veranda, eyes locked on where I stood though he seemed not to see the world in front of him. I could only imagine, if he'd seen those same flickering images in his mind of himself transformed into that demonic form that shook my heart, the lingering memory of them was haunting him now. Maybe it wasn't my place to speak, but despite that I called out to him. "Sannan-san. You-" From behind his glasses, his eyes burned into me with just as much fire as if they had already changed to those ember-bright eyes that shone in the night. I turned away with my cheeks flushing and wind-bit by the air to study the walls in the distance surrounding the compound. "I think... there's nothing you should regret, either."

Sannan-san let out a sigh that fell just short of a scoff. "I believe I know that better than anyone."

The last thing I saw that day was his back as he trod off into the late afternoon.

End
file.